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ABSTRACT

Designed to investigate verbal aggression in State of the Union messages during times of war and peace, this study attempted to devise a method for quantitatively analyzing verbal aggression in public, political communication and to describe and explain the relationship of verbal aggression in State of the Union messages to the existence of war (wartime/non-wartime) and issues context (domestic/foreign). Results indicated that presidents tend to use more verbal aggression during wartime than non-wartime periods, that verbal aggression appears in greater proportion in foreign than domestic contexts during both wartime and non-wartime, that there is proportionally more verbal aggression in a foreign context during wartime than in a foreign context during non-wartime, and that verbal aggression in a domestic context does not appear to vary in proportion from wartime to non-wartime. (RB)

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VERBAL AGGRESSION IN STATE OF THE UNION MESSAGES DURING WARTIME AND NON-WARTIME

J. Weldon Stice

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PURPOSE

Although a great deal of empirical research has dealt with the phenomenon of human aggression, a relatively small proportion of it has focused on aggression in its verbal form. Researchers investigating verbal aggression have done so through a primarily social psychological perspective, and have confined their explorations to individuals or classes of individuals, as opposed to types or classes of communication. Research settings and communication modes have been controlled, interpersonal, and non-public.

Prior to this study, no method has existed for quantitatively analyzing verbal aggression in the public speaking context. Such a technique appears to be especially valuable in the area of public, political communication. The term political is used here in the sense of governmental function rather than partisan politics.

Some of the most influential political addresses are those given by the President of the United States. Among these the annual State of the Union messages are of paramount national and international importance since they include statements of past, present, and future United States domestic and foreign policy. In addition they often both reflect and create the political/ economic/ social tenor of this nation.

The purpose of this study was, therefore, two-fold. First, it attempted to devise a method for quantitatively analyzing verbal

CS 500 806

aggression in public, political communication. Secondly, it endeavored to describe and explain the relationship of verbal aggression in State of the Union messages to the existence of war (wartime/non-wartime) and issues context (domestic/foreign). In addition, an effort was made to determine if individual Presidents maintain verbal aggression "norms" during both wartime and non-wartime.

VARIABLES

Independent Variables

Two independent variables were investigated in terms of their relationship to verbal aggression in State of the Union messages: wartime/non-wartime chronological periods; domestic/foreign issues context.

As defined by A Dictionary of the Social Sciences, "War may denote a socially recognized situation in which armed hostilities of considerable magnitude are conducted more or less continuously between two or more nations, states, or governments." This definition encompasses both declared and undeclared wars, the Korean conflict being an example of the latter. The requirement that hostilities be of considerable magnitude excludes such minor military engagements and police actions as the Barbary Coast incidents of the early 19th century and the Dominican Republic confrontation in 1965. Non-wartime was defined as those chronological periods during which the United States was not engaged in armed hostilities of a considerable magnitude.

Foreign context was defined for this study as meaning that the subjects or issues being spoken about were related to individuals, groups, or systems existing outside the territorial boundaries of the United States. Domestic context means that the subjects or issues being spoken about are related only to individuals, groups or systems existing inside the territorial boundaries of the United States. In accordance with these

definitions, if a subject or issue dealt with individuals, groups, or systems affiliated with both the United States and other nations, it was considered as being in a foreign context.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable being measured in this study was verbal aggression. Verbal aggression was defined as "a verbal message perceived by an observer as being noxious; and which has a recognizable source, target, and attitude/action statement". The source is the origin of the verbally aggressive act (in this case the President as the aggressor or as the representative of the aggressing faction). The target is the recipient or intended recipient of the aggressive action. Attitude/action statements reflect aggressive attitudes, describe aggressive actions, or both.

During his investigation, this researcher discovered that a tense factor existed in verbal aggression usage. In other words, a threat may be implicitly couched in the recounting of past physical aggression. Since no research supports or denies this intuitive speculation, and its investigation was beyond the purview of this study, all tenses were considered to be in the present mode.

Contemporary aggression theory explains the dynamics of aggression as the interaction of two psychological components, instigation to aggression and inhibition of aggression (Berkowitz, 1962; Buss, 1961). Instigation to aggression refers to those factors which motivate an individual to commit an aggressive act, physical or verbal. Inhibition of aggression may be defined as those factors acting against a particular aggressive act directed at a particular target. Verbal aggression is determined then by the relative strength or weakness of those factors instigating and inhibiting its expression.

The basic verbal aggression paradigm used in this study was that of Buss (1961). Buss conceptualizes verbal aggression as taking two forms: rejection and threat. Rejection labels the victim as "aversive, bad, or unwanted." Threat is "a response that symbolizes, substitutes for, or is anticipatory of subsequent attack."

In order to better operationalize the verbal aggression construct, a sub-category system based on the Buss rejection/threat model was formulated. This was accomplished through synthesis of verbal aggression categories used in previous studies (McClelland and Apicella, 1945; Mortimer, 1966; Mosher, 1968; Mosher and Proenza, 1968; Schelling, 1966; Thibaut and Coules, 1952; Walters, Pearce & Dahms, 1957; Wetring, 1971).

Verbal Aggression Scale

REJECTION

1. Dismissal- the source of the verbal aggression demands, requests, or states a desire for withdrawal of the target itself, or the cessation of specified activities.

2. Hostile Remark- a direct statement of a cognitive negative attitude toward the target itself.

3. Criticism- a direct statement of a cognitive negative attitude toward possessions or actions of the target. It may also take an indirect form through the attachment of descriptive terms or labels implying negative attitudes toward possession or actions of the target.

4. Derogation- a direct or indirect statement of cognitive negative attitude toward characteristics of the target These characteristics may be values, attitudes, beliefs, etc., or anything of a highly personal nature.

THREAT

1. Explicit Offense- any action (military, political, economic, etc.) directed toward the target by the source.

2. Explicit Defense- any action taken to repulse, stop, or inhibit undesirable infringements (of beliefs, policies, ideals, etc.) or encroachments (attempts to invade territory, or destroy or confiscate possessions) by the target.

3. Implicit Offense- past, present or future capability or potential to take offensive action. Capability here refers to the attitude or activity necessary for offensive action, whereas potential refers to the physical means for offensive action.

4. Implicit Defense- past, present, or future capability or potential to take defensive measures. Capability and potential are defined as in implicit offense.

The content validity of the foregoing verbal aggression scale was hopefully established by: (1) reviewing current aggression theory in order to determine which kinds of verbal behavior constitute aggressive acts (2) ascertaining which sub-categories of verbal aggression are applicable to public, political communication through examination of previous verbal aggression research (3) a pilot study which was undertaken to assess the practical utility of the verbal aggression category system.

Coding reliablity scores for the scale are presented in the following table:

TABLE 1

Coding Reliability for Verbal Aggression Scale

Decision Level	Inter-Coder	Test-Retest
Aggression/Non-Aggression	+.75	+.91
Rejection/Threat if Aggression	+.92	+1.00
Overall Category System	+.64	+ .86

METHOD AND PROCEDURE

Methodology

The general analytical technique employed was content analysis. Paisley (1967) defines content analysis as follows:

> Content analysis is a phase of information-processing in which communication content is transformed, through objective and systematic application of categorization rules, into data that can be summarized and compared.

Procedure

Since analysis of the complete corpus of State of the Union messages was impractical, sampling procedure was employed. The universe from which the samples were drawn consisted of all wartime and non-wartime State of the Union messages delivered by Presidents whose tenure of office included both wartime and non-wartime periods. Although limiting the population tospecific Presidents and particular wars, this procedure allowed for Presidents to be matched with themselves, thus controlling for idiosyncratic use of verbal aggression. Table 2 indicates which wartime periods were used in the study.

TABLE 2

U. S. Wartime Periods

War	Beginning Date	Ending Date
War of 1812	June 18, 1812	December 24, 1814
Mexican War	May 13, 1846	February 2, 1848
Spanish American War	April 21, 1898	August 12, 1898
World War I	April 6, 1917	November 11, 1918
World War II	December 7, 1941	September 2, 1945
Korean War	June 27, 1950	July 27, 1953
Vietnam War	Mid-1962	Mid-1973

Table 3 shows which President's messages were analyzed.

TABLE 3

Wartime and Non-wartime State of the Union Messages

President	Wartime Message	Non-wartime messages
Madison	4,5,6	1,2,3,7,8
Polk	2,3	1,4
McKinley	2	1,3,4
Wilson	5	1,2,3,4,6,7,8,
Roosevelt, F.D.	9, 10, 11, 12	1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8
Truman	6,7,8	1,2,3,4,5
Eisenhower	1	2,3,4,5,6,7-,8,9
Kennedy	3	1,2

The texts of these speeches were obtained either from Israel's (1966) compilation of State of the Union messages or from the Congressional Record.

A multi-stage random sampling technique, too detailed for presentation here, resulted in 96 wartime and 96 non-wartime "message units" for each President.

At this point it may be necessary to explain "unitizing". Simply stated, it is the process of dividing written or spoken messages into units for purposes of analysis. Holsti (1969) classifies units of analysis as recording units and context units. Recording units are the specific segment of content that is to be coded by placing it in a given category (in this case, a verbal aggression sub-category). Recording unit level (word, sentence, paragraph, etc.) will vary

according to the amount of information necessary to satisfy the purpose and design of each individual research project. The recording unit used in this study was the "thought group" as characterized by four types of grammatical structure: the independent clause; the non-restrictive dependent clause; the adverbial dependent clause; and the verbal phrase.

A context unit is the largest body of content that may be searched to characterize a recording unit. In other words, meaning may often be derived only from viewing a recording unit in context. The context unit for this study was the paragraph.

Quantitative description of communication content necessitates the use of some system of enumeration. Psychological variables such as verbal aggression may be measured by frequency of occurance and degree of intensity. Not only do content analysts disagree as to the necessity for measurement on both levels, but this researcher seriously questioned the validity of several studies whose verbal aggression categories were scaled on vaguely explained ordinal intensity heirarchys. Consequently, "message units" were coded in the verbal aggression categories according to their frequency of occurance only.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS/HUPOTHESES/RESULTS

Research question: If war creates a situation highly instigating to aggression, will there be more verbal aggression during wartime than non-wartime?

H_1: There is a significantly greater proportion of verbal aggression in State of the Union messages during wartime than non-wartime.

Results: With N=8, the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-rank test supported H_1 at the $p \leq .005$ level of significance.

Research question: If there is a higher proportion of verbal aggression during wartime than non-wartime is it generalized or directed toward the source of instigation?

H_2: There is a significantly greater proportion of verbal aggression in a foreign context than a domestic context in wartime State of the Union messages.

Results: With N=8, the one-tailed Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed ranks test supported H_2 at the $p \leq .005$ level of significance.

Research question: If H_2 is true, that still doesn't prove that verbal aggression is directed toward the source of instigation, expecially if the same hypothesis holds true for non-wartime. Is there more verbal aggression in foreign than domestic context during non-wartime?

H_3: There is a significantly greater proportion of verbal aggression in a foreign context than a domestic context in non-wartime State of the Union messages.

Results: With N=8, the one-tailed Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test supported H_3 at the $p \leq .01$ level of significance.

Research question: If H_3 is true, it indicates that there is more verbal aggression in foreign than domestic contexts during both wartime and non-wartime. If the verbal aggression is directed toward the source of instigation, will there be more verbal aggression in a foreign context during wartime than non-wartime?

H_4: There is a significantly greater proportion of verbal aggression in State of the Union messages in a foreign context during wartime than in a foreign context during non-wartime.

Results: With N=8, the one-tailed Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed ranks test supported H_4 at the $p \leq .005$ level of significance.

Research question: If H_4 is true, it only demonstrates that verbal aggression is directed toward the source of instigation if the same is not true of verbal aggression in a domestic context during wartime and non-wartime.

H_5: There is a significant difference between the proportion of verbal aggression in State of the Union messages in a domestic context during wartime and in a domestic context during non-wartime.

Results: With N=8, the two-tailed Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-rank test failed to support H_5.

Research question: If H_2 and H_3 are true, it would suggest that the President was somewhat inhibited about using verbal aggression in a domestic context, even during non-wartime. If H_4 is true, it would appear that Presidents are reluctant to use verbal aggression in a foreign context during non-wartime. Since research suggests that threat is disapproved of more than rejection (Mosher, 1968; Mosher & Proenza, 1968), and Presidents are inhibited when speaking in a domestic context, the following two hypotheses should be supported.

H_6: There is significantly more rejection than threat in a domestic context in wartime State of the Union messages.

Results: When using the Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test, all ties of raw scores are dropped from the analysis. The N is reduced accordingly. Consequently, three of the scores were dropped from analysis, reducing the N from 8 to 5. With an N as low as 5, the Wilcoxon test cannot be used to test hypotheses. However, the usable data suggest support for H_6.

H_7: There is significantly more rejection than threat in a domestic context in non-wartime State of the Union messages.

Results: Since there were two ties in the raw score, N was reduced from 8 to 6. With N = 6, the one-tailed Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test failed to support H_7.

Research question: If type of verbal aggression (rejection or threat) is an inhibiting factor, and during wartime instigation is high and inhibition low, will threat be used more than rejection in a foreign context during wartime?

H_8: There is significantly more threat than rejection in a foreign context in wartime State of the Union messages.

Results: With N = 8, the one-tailed Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test supported H_8 at $p \leq .025$ level of significance.

Research question: H_8 is meaningful only if the same hypothesis is not true during non-wartime, when inhibition about using aversive forms of verbal aggression toward other nations is very high.

H_9: There is a significant difference in the frequency of occurrence of threat and rejection in a foreign context in non-wartime State of the Union messages.

Results: With N = 8 the two-tailed Wilcoxon matched-pairs signed-ranks test failed to support H_9.

Research question:: Berkowitz (1962) suggests that individuals differ in their use of verbal aggression. Some individuals have a greater propensity for verbal aggression than others, and this aggressive personality trait appears to remain consistent from situation to situation. Therefore, shouldn't the ranked comparative verbal aggression level among Presidents stay the same during both wartime and non-wartime?

H_{10}: There is a significant positive rank correlation between individual President's proportionate use of verbal aggression in State of the Union messages during wartime and non-wartime.

Results: With N=8, the one-tailed Spearman Rank Correlation Coefficient did not support H_{10}. However, a rank correlation coefficient of +.62 was obtained, and is considered to be fairly substantial.

RESULTS SUMMARY

Results indicate that Presidents tend to use more verbal aggression during wartime than non-wartime. Verbal aggression appears in greater proportion in foreign than domestic contexts during both wartime and non-wartime; however, there is proportionally more verbal aggression in a foreign context during wartime than in a foreign context during non-wartime. Verbal aggression in a domestic context does not appear to vary in proportion from wartime to non-wartime.

When speaking in a domestic context, Presidents use more rejection than threat during both wartime and non-wartime. During wartime, Presidents use more threat than rejection when speaking in a foreign context. The use of rejection and threat does not appear to differ in a foreign context during non-wartime.

The existence or non-existence of a major military conflict does not appear to affect the verbal aggression rank of Presidents when they are compared to each other. Those who are high in verbal aggression during wartime are also high during non-wartime, and those who are low during wartime are also low during non-wartime.

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